



5. The Case for Curriculum

Since A Nation at Risk, Education Reform Efforts Have Mostly Stopped at the Classroom Door

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Executive Summary

Decades of education reform have left policymakers, educators, and students alike fatigued and unimpressed. From standardized testing to accountability measures and smaller classroom sizes, almost every idea under the sun has been tried and tried again, except for one: curriculum reform is the black sheep of education, long thought to be the sole domain of the individual teacher, with even the most prominent education reformers unwilling to take up its banner. Inspired by the work of E. D. Hirsch Jr. and the emerging science of reading movement, policymakers and educators should come together and work to reform the slapdash and unchallenging curriculum that defines many American classrooms and craft new knowledge-rich materials that align with high standards. When research indicates that a strong curriculum leads to greater results for students than replacing a 50th-percentile teacher with a 75th-percentile teacher, it is unthinkable that we would not make every effort to introduce high-quality instructional materials into the classrooms around the nation. The education reform movement of the past few decades has underperformed, exhausting its energy and spending its moral capital on “structural” reforms like standardized testing, accountability, and programs to transform the American teacher workforce. Placing curriculum at the center of reform efforts holds the promise to not only raise academic outcomes, but also get better results from the teachers we have—not the teachers we wish we had.

- American educators have tried many reforms to raise academic outcomes without finding one reform that works consistently.
- Curriculum reform is the one approach that hasn’t been given a fair trial.
- Rather than blaming the teacher education system, let’s try an approach that offers the promise of boosting outcomes with the existing workforce.



Several years ago, fresh from my South Bronx fifth-grade classroom and still feeling my way through the unfamiliar world of public policy and education reform, I found myself in a New York City ballroom where Michelle Rhee was receiving the Manhattan Institute’s Urban Innovator Award. She was, at that time and by a considerable margin, the most prominent and celebrated figure of the education reform movement in the United States, which was itself at the zenith of its power, prestige, and moral authority. As then chancellor of Washington, DC, schools, Rhee instituted a series of high-profile reforms, including closing chronically failing schools and tying teacher pay to performance. A few months earlier, she had been on the cover of *Time* magazine scowling and wielding a broom—a symbol of her determination to sweep underperforming teachers out of the city’s classrooms.

Rhee had recently announced the launch of a new initiative, Students First, and a goal to raise \$1 billion to support political candidates to advocate for “real change,” which she defined as putting students’ needs before those of adult interests such as teachers’ unions or wasteful bureaucracies like the one she’d been waging war upon in the nation’s capital. From my vantage point as a classroom teacher and curriculum reform advocate, focusing attention, energy, and resources on political campaigns and legislative races seemed even less likely to improve student outcomes than the work she’d been doing running Washington’s school system.

After the event, I had the opportunity to talk with Rhee about her reform work as chancellor and the work she was now envisioning in political advocacy. I wondered aloud whether it made sense to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of individual teachers who are poorly trained, have little say over their curriculum, and as often as not have no curriculum at all. As she moved from leading a major metropolitan school district to a position of influence over state-level education decisions, perhaps she might keep curriculum in mind? “The last thing we’re going to do,” she replied with a chuckle, “is get wrapped up in curriculum battles.”

I was taken aback by the dismissal. Readers may recall that Rhee was the embodiment of an ed reform movement that embraced a confrontational, even pugilistic style. In her talk that afternoon before a number of prominent figures in education and policymaking, she’d urged her listeners not to shrink from conflict on behalf of children, yet she herself had no stomach for a debate over what America’s children should learn in school.

More than a decade later, the encounter still stands out in my memory. Confronting the teachers’ unions on pay and tenure is worth a fight. So, too, is flipping a state legislative seat. Yet it was too heavy a lift to say what third-graders should know about American history, geography, or science, or whether they needed to know anything at all.

In fairness, this mindset was not unique to Rhee, who was merely the most vocal and visible representative of a theory of change common to education reformers of the time, which saw the external structures of education and the exercise of political power as the most important levers for improving student outcomes. The logic of this brand of reform assumed, at least

tacitly, that schools and teachers know what to do, have the capacity for improvement, and need mostly to be properly incentivized—or threatened—in order to be made to do it. The cri de coeur that launched the modern education reform movement, the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, appropriately sounded an alarm over school curricula that “have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose” and have been replaced with “a cafeteria style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses.” But concern over the substance of K-12 education in the United States had become an afterthought among the “structural reform” leaders like Rhee who came to prominence a generation later.¹

With the benefit of hindsight, it is no longer controversial to say that the structural reform theory of change has underperformed, its assumptions found wanting. To be sure, while twelfth-grade scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have not budged in two generations, there was evidence prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of gains in the earlier years of the twenty-first century, particularly in fourth-grade reading and math.² Nor has the education reform movement been without significant accomplishments. Urban charter schools, the movement’s clearest victory, have transformed urban education for low-income students of color in many major US cities, creating unprecedented opportunities for students and bringing competitive pressure to bear on local school districts.³ Graduates of schools founded and run by charter management networks continue to graduate from high school and attend college at much higher rates than they would have had those schools never existed.⁴ But the fact remains that if the classic ed reform playbook of higher academic standards, high-stakes testing, and muscular accountability was going to bear fruit, drive watershed improvement in student outcomes, or appreciably narrow racial achievement gaps, we’d have clear evidence of it by now.

Worse, as the education reform movement evolved from the do-gooder earnestness of its early days to a punitive technocratic regime, it overspent its moral capital and contributed to unmistakable reform fatigue.⁵ This led a significant number of public education stakeholders—parents, teachers, and taxpayers—to regard its policies and practices with skepticism, even cynicism, particularly as education spending continued to rise while student achievement stagnated and even declined.⁶

The lingering effects of COVID-related disruptions have shifted much of the attention in US education away from long-running debates over testing and accountability to more urgent discussions about learning loss, student mental health issues, and declining school attendance. It seems unlikely that the bipartisan ed reform coalition whose agenda dominated America’s K-12 agenda in the first decades of the twenty-first century will be returning to prominence anytime soon, if ever. The appetite for reform has waned considerably. The movement is what advertising and marketing professionals call a tainted brand. Indeed, ed reform “is now considered to be a loaded term that is no longer spoken in polite company,” former Massachusetts secretary of education James Peyser recently observed, “without risking a heated argument or losing the friendship of former allies.”⁷

EDUCATION REFORM'S NEXT FRONTIER: INSTRUCTIONAL REFORM

A simple fact about education in the United States trumps all others, yet has been largely overlooked in the education reform era and contributed to its disappointing underperformance: it takes nearly four million women and men to staff America's K-12 classrooms. A number that large, by definition, means that teachers will be people of average abilities and sentience—not saints, not superstars, and, more pertinently, not the cognitive elite, who do not exist in sufficient numbers to staff more than a fraction of America's classrooms. At the same time, it is not an overstatement to say that the ever-increasing demands placed on the average teacher make the job nearly impossible to do well, consistently, or sustainably. The reluctance even to cite, let alone address, this mismatch of expectations and abilities contributes to the mediocre performance of education in the United States, which has not changed significantly or satisfactorily since *A Nation at Risk* warned that “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”⁸

If teacher capacity is unlikely to change, then what must change is the teacher's job. If the education reform movement is to regain its momentum and moral authority, becoming not merely a disruptive force but an *effective* one, it must reinvent itself as a practice-based movement that is clear-eyed and candid about human capital and system capacity, committed not to transforming the teacher workforce but to making teaching doable by the *existing* workforce and those likely to enter the profession in the future.

At the same time, candor requires acknowledging that this transformation can't be speedily or satisfactorily addressed, even if taken up with urgency. Education policy is a weak lever to change classroom practice. Enduring change requires shifts in the culture of teaching, which is notoriously slow to evolve, resistant to change, and skeptical—even cynical—about reform. For a 2017 study published by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Wartburg College professor Richard Snyder interviewed a series of teachers with more than twenty years in the field to understand their perspectives on reforms and change. One teacher, who was aggravated with changes to class schedules, often ignored new directives from administrators. “In fact, Mr. Booker—a social studies teacher with over 30 years of experience—acknowledged giving ‘lip service’ to numerous initiatives, then returning to his own classroom intent on accomplishing intellectual discourse through interactive lecture.”⁹ Other teachers criticized increased top-down control, whether it be from Common Core State Standards or area education agency (AEA) consultants. Concerned about her loss of autonomy, Mrs. Rittmeyer stated:

So now the AEA is teaching us how to teach because we don't know how to teach kids how to read, and learn letters and sounds, things like that . . . never have darkened the doors of our classroom, but they can meet with us once a week and tell us what to do. That's very frustrating.¹⁰

The cyclical change and rebranding of old ideas common to education reform frustrated teachers the most. A high school teacher told Snyder, “I've become more frustrated,

especially when I started hearing things I've heard before and [being] spun as new. . . . I don't like the way we, we put brand new wrappers on things . . . and I sit through a pile of meetings and hear the same things I heard 15 years ago."¹¹

There is one arrow in the policymaker's quiver that remains mostly unutilized and can be used to effect positive change: curriculum reform. The adoption and implementation of high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) and making curriculum and its implementation central to school improvement efforts contribute to working conditions that allow teachers to focus on lesson *delivery*—not lesson *design*—while lending greater consistency to the student experience regardless of school setting and raising outcomes at something closer to scale. A systematic 2017 review of the effects of curricular choices in K-12 education conducted by the Johns Hopkins Center for Research and Reform in Education concluded that curriculum is “a critical factor in student academic success” and that a “comprehensive, content-rich curriculum is a common feature of academically high-performing countries.”¹² However, to a degree largely lost upon policymakers and other stakeholders in education, the curricula in most US schools and districts are not “comprehensive and content-rich” at all, but teacher driven, often improvisational and incoherent.

We have known for some time (or at least have had ample reason for curiosity and further study) that curriculum could be a richer vein of ore to mine than many of the more commonly pulled “structural” reform levers. In 2012, Grover J. “Russ” Whitehurst and Matthew M. Chingos noted in a widely read Brookings Institution paper that the effect size of choosing a better second-grade math curriculum was larger than replacing a 50th-percentile teacher with a 75th-percentile teacher. Clearly, it is easier to give children access to a strong curriculum than it is to dramatically increase the effectiveness of their teachers. At the same time, Whitehurst and Chingos lamented that “little research exists on the effectiveness of most instructional materials, and very little systematic information has been collected on which materials are being used in which schools.”¹³

It is hard to account for or excuse entirely the long-standing indifference to curriculum in education reform, which has long seemed to assume that differences in student outcomes are attributable mostly to who the teacher is, not what is being taught. To be sure, researchers have amply demonstrated that some teachers are more effective than others.¹⁴ But identifying what makes them so has proven elusive. No consistent or clear relationship has been found, for example, between teacher credentialing or certification exams and classroom effectiveness.¹⁵ However, education reformers of the late 1990s and early 2000s were enamored with “alternative certification” routes and high-profile initiatives like Teach for America to lure the “best and the brightest” graduates of elite universities to spend at least a few years in the classroom. Results have been mixed.¹⁶ But even if they were stellar, more than 80 percent of full-time teachers still enter the classroom via traditional training and certification routes, limiting this strategy's potential for transformational change.¹⁷ Neither is it likely that simply paying teachers more will make the profession as attractive to the best and brightest as technology, engineering, medicine, or law.

“What we teach isn't some sidebar issue in American education: it *is* American education,” David Steiner, executive director of the Institute for Education Policy at Johns Hopkins, has

noted. “The track record of top-performing countries, early evidence of positive effects from the faithful implementation of high-quality curricula here in the United States, and the persistent evidence that our classrooms are underchallenging our students at every level compel us to put the materials that we use to teach at the core of serious education reform.”¹⁸ If the assumption is that curriculum either is settled or doesn’t matter to student outcomes, it is a demonstrably incorrect assumption. A 2016 study by RAND Corporation revealed that virtually every English language arts (ELA) teacher in America—99 percent of elementary teachers; 96 percent of secondary school teachers—routinely use “materials they created or selected themselves.” Among elementary school teachers, 94 percent reported turning to Google to find ELA lesson plans and instructional materials; 87 percent searched Pinterest. The numbers are virtually the same for math.¹⁹ Survey data by the research firm MDR found that teachers spend seven hours per week searching for instructional resources and another five hours per week creating their own classroom materials.²⁰ The open question is whether this is an effective use of teacher time, and what might they use those hours for instead.

In theory, curating, customizing, or creating lessons from scratch allows teachers to tailor their instruction to meet the specific needs, interests, and abilities of their students. By designing their own curriculum, either in whole or in part, teachers can ostensibly adapt and differentiate class content, instructional methods, and assessments, resulting in a more personalized and engaging learning experience for students. If it could be demonstrated that the vast number of hours teachers spent doing curriculum design work paid dividends in raising student achievement, then no further comment would be necessary. The available evidence does not suggest a richer academic experience for students, however.

A 2019 study authored by University of Southern California Associate Professor Morgan Polikoff and education consultant Jennifer Dean explored the quality of supplemental materials teachers downloaded from popular websites, revealing “a major mismatch between what content experts think educators should (and shouldn’t) use in classrooms and what teachers, hungry for instructional resources, are choosing to download.”²¹ Polikoff and Dean rated most of the materials teachers chose themselves from popular websites such as Share My Lesson and Teachers Pay Teachers as “mediocre” or “probably not worth using.” Similarly, a 2018 report from the New Teacher Project (TNTP) based on one thousand observations found that students “spent more than 500 hours per school year on assignments that weren’t appropriate for their grade and with instruction that didn’t ask enough of them—the equivalent of six months of wasted class time in each core subject.”²² Disadvantaged students were the hardest hit. “Classrooms that served predominantly students from higher income backgrounds spent twice as much time on grade-appropriate assignments and five times as much time with strong instruction, compared to classrooms with predominantly students from low-income backgrounds,” the study found.

A more comprehensive and rigorous study, conducted by Thomas J. Kane of Harvard University and David Blazar of the University of Maryland, examined data on student achievement and math textbook adoptions in six states over the course of three school years and found “little evidence of differences in average math achievement growth in schools using different elementary math curricula.”²³ However, the pair also reported that while the vast majority

of teachers used their school’s official curriculum in more than half of their lessons, few used it exclusively. Even more pertinently—perhaps ominously—they found only “modest” amounts of teacher professional development on the adopted textbooks and curriculum.

“Some may interpret our findings as implying that curriculum choice does not matter. We believe that would be an overstatement,” wrote Kane, Blazar, and their colleagues. “It is true that, at current levels of classroom implementation, we do not see that schools using different textbooks or curriculum materials differed in terms of average student achievement growth on the CCSS-aligned assessments. Yet, it is possible that, with greater support for classroom implementation, the advantages of specific curricula would emerge and we would see larger differences” (31).

In a commentary on the report, Kane and David Steiner compared teachers’ use of newly adopted curricula to a smartphone with “mysterious functions” that most consumers never use, preferring instead to dabble with the unfamiliar device. “With the new curricula, we have handed teachers a tool much more complicated than any smartphone, one that holds great promise but requires complex behavior changes. And we have largely left them to figure it out on their own,” the pair observed. “The average teacher received only 1.1 days of professional development devoted to their curriculum during the 2016–17 school year and 3.4 days when including prior years.” Rather than conclude that curriculum has no effect on student outcomes, the pair wisely prescribed a “call to action,” stating the following:

Education policymakers can no longer simply exhort schools and districts to implement curricula more thoroughly. We need to provide clearer guidance on an effective transition to more-rigorous curricula. States, districts, and the national philanthropies who have been supporting the better materials should test different packages of supports—with different combinations of professional development for teachers, training for principals on what to look for during classroom observations, classroom coaching, videotaped practice sessions with teachers—and identify the suite of supports necessary to generate closer adherence to the curricula and to boost student achievement.”²⁴

In sum, spending hours on customizing curriculum or creating units and lessons from scratch is burdensome, results in lessons of low rigor and quality, and is almost certainly a less valuable use of teacher time than studying student work, giving feedback, developing subject matter expertise, and building relationships with students and their families. The bespoke nature of instructional planning is a standard feature of a teacher’s job in the United States but one that lacks evidence of efficacy.

Change does not have to come in the form of a centralized, top-down curriculum imposed by distant state governments, but as the guarantor of public education, states have a clear interest in ensuring that the best curricula are adopted and implemented. In the early 2010s, under the tenure of then superintendent of education John White, the state of Louisiana pioneered an approach whereby the state department of education, in partnership with teachers across the state, evaluated dozens of math and ELA curriculum programs, sorting them into three quality tiers and publishing the results online. Districts that adopted the top “Tier 1” programs

were given financial incentives and state-provided professional development to encourage adoption, thus, in the words of one state education official, “making the best choice the easy choice.” Initial results were encouraging: the 2015 NAEP tests showing that “Louisiana 4th graders showed the highest growth among all states . . . and the second-highest in math” provide suggestive evidence that curriculum reform holds promise as an effective weapon for raising test scores.²⁵

Crucially, there is broad support among teachers for the adoption and implementation of HQIM. In a May 2022 report on the availability of HQIM, EdReports, the leading reviewer of instructional materials in the United States, surveyed teachers and asked how important it was for the materials they use to be aligned with standards. Nearly three-fourths (73.3 percent) of teachers said it was “extremely important,” and another 20.9 percent said it was “somewhat” important.²⁶ Even so, the actual use of HQIM in classrooms is shockingly low. EdReports also found that only 25.6 percent of teachers used at least one ELA standards-aligned material per week, with that percentage rising to 39.7 percent for math standards materials.²⁷ This reinforces the impression that teachers lack the discernment when choosing or customizing curricular materials to exercise their judgment appropriately. Reducing this gap between the belief in using HQIM and the actual use of those materials is a key priority in making sure students get the best possible education.

THE BENEFITS OF A CORE CURRICULUM

For decades, the renowned education theorist E. D. Hirsch Jr. has argued for the adoption of a core curriculum across academic disciplines and from the first days of school based on a belief, firmly grounded in cognitive science, that a shared body of knowledge is an essential building block of literacy in an economically and socially diverse country.²⁸ Hirsch’s argument emphasizes that a core curriculum would help bridge gaps in knowledge among students from diverse backgrounds, promote social cohesion, and equip individuals with the foundational knowledge necessary for success in various academic and professional pursuits, while contributing to the broadly embraced goal of building students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Hirsch’s vision suggests that there should be far more similarities than differences in the student experience regardless of where a child attends school and regardless of their socioeconomic status. Specifying the knowledge and skills that children should share and which their education would give them fair and equal access to would promote educational excellence and equity, allowing all to engage meaningfully in society, understand complex texts, and communicate effectively.

It is beyond the reach of even the most determined policymaker to impose a single curriculum on America’s K-12 education system, however, simply because no such system exists. The word “education” famously appears nowhere in the US Constitution, thus devolving the responsibility to the individual states. The political unpopularity of Common Core State Standards, commonly mistaken for a national curriculum, demonstrates the hostility to anything approaching federal control of classroom content. Our tradition of local control of education makes it unlikely in the

extreme that the United States will ever adopt the kind of national curriculum common to many other nations, including those whose academic performance easily outpaces our own. Any significant momentum to make curricular content more consistent from state to state, from district to district, and even across the hall in the same school will have to be driven by reforms from within the field of education itself. The strongest argument for this is that it is simply too much to ask of teachers to be effective at both curriculum design and delivery. It places undue burden on teachers with no evidence of effectiveness for students.

In his 2016 book *Leadership for Teacher Learning*, Dylan Wiliam observes that when teachers are asked to identify something that they will stop doing or do less of to create time and space for them to explore improvements to their teaching, they fail miserably. “They go through the list of their current tasks and duties and conclude that there is nothing they can stop doing or do less of, because everything that they are doing contributes to student learning,” he writes.²⁹ “In my experience, it is hardly ever the case that teachers are doing things that are unproductive. This is why leadership in education is so challenging. The essence of effective leadership is stopping people from doing good things to give them time to do even better things.”³⁰

What might those “better things” include? For my own 2019 book, *How the Other Half Learns*, I spent a year embedded in a high-performing Success Academy charter school in New York City’s South Bronx, a few blocks from where I’d taught fifth grade in a struggling elementary school run by the New York City Department of Education some years earlier. Success Academy, a network of approximately fifty charter schools based in New York City, has distinguished itself with an outstanding track record of high achievement among the predominantly low-income, minority students it serves. If it were a stand-alone public school district, its test scores would make it New York State’s best-performing district, despite the high concentration of poverty in most of the neighborhoods in which its schools are located.

The purpose of the book was to see what lessons could be gleaned from Success Academy’s instructional model and exported to K-12 public education at large. In the course of my reporting, I interviewed a pair of hedge fund managers who had written the charter school application for what was originally called Gotham Charter School. Joel Greenblatt and John Petry focused their efforts on creating a school model that was replicable, a conviction reinforced by visits to high-performing New York City charters like KIPP Infinity Middle School in Harlem. “We were watching this amazing English lesson. I elbowed the assistant teacher and said, ‘Just for my interest, what’s the background of that teacher?’” Greenblatt told me in an interview for the book. “‘He wrote for [the television sitcom] *Frasier* for five years,’” she replied. “It would be wonderful if everyone could have that teacher, but everyone can’t,” Greenblatt explained.³¹

This insight was out of step with the education orthodoxy of the time and the orthodoxy of the “no excuses” charter school movement in particular. But it found its way under CEO Eva Moskowitz into the model of Success Academy, which implements a single curriculum across its network, creating ripple effects in the classroom. Like teachers everywhere, Success Academy staff spend a significant amount of their time preparing lessons for students. However, where lesson planning for many, even most, US teachers involves lesson creation

or customization, at Success Academy it's referred to as "intellectual preparation." As the name implies, it means preparing to teach a lesson or unit, not creating one from scratch. This appears to greatly contribute to one of Success Academy's most significant accomplishments: its ability to get uniformly good results from relatively inexperienced teachers. It is important to note that Success Academy's curriculum is not "scripted." Teachers work from an established curriculum—units and lesson sequences prepared by network-level staff. Success Academy's model asks teachers to focus on *teaching*, not on creating curriculum or gathering instructional resources. Compared to the more common practice of lesson planning as lesson design, Success Academy's model functionally creates hours of capacity for teachers to look at data, study student work, diagnose, act, adapt, and intervene quickly when students are struggling or falling behind. As Moskowitz told me at the time, "You can't be successful in our model without studying student work."³²

One of the promises of the US charter school movement is that those schools might serve as laboratories for innovative instructional practices and strategies.³³ Adopting a core curriculum and asking teachers to focus on lesson delivery, not on lesson design, and asking them to study student work and become effective diagnosticians and interventionists is one such practice that appears worth emulating.

CONCLUSION

Gifted musicians in an orchestra generally do not write the symphonies they play. We do not think less of a talented actor who merely performs but did not write a Shakespearean tragedy. Great chefs need not be farmers, butchers, or fishermen. Teachers, by noteworthy contrast, are expected to be both expert lesson deliverers and instruction designers. Significantly, this expectation is something the profession tends to valorize; it didn't drift into it. Teachers College at Columbia University, for example, among the premier teacher preparation programs in America, maintains as a core tenet of its Master of Arts in Curriculum and Teaching program that "teachers are necessarily and rightly adapters and designers of curriculum."³⁴ There is no evidence that this practice benefits students.

Making curriculum an afterthought in our efforts to improve student outcomes and giving insufficient professional development to properly implement those materials when they are adopted makes a hard job nearly impossible and virtually enshrines poor performance and teacher burnout as policy. As Marcy Stein, an education professor with expertise in evaluating instructional design at the University of Washington-Tacoma, puts it, "Few teachers ever take coursework on instructional design and, therefore, have little knowledge of the role it plays in student learning." Further reflecting on the many extraneous burdens we place on teachers, Stein notes:

Even if teachers were taught about instructional design, they would likely not have the time to prepare instructional materials, field test those materials to determine if they are effective, and modify the materials before using them to teach students. An iterative process is crucial for the development of effective materials.³⁵

Readers might be tempted to see in between the lines of the preceding quotation an argument for the elimination of teacher autonomy or even a case for “McSchool,” a basic education deliverable by teachers of minimal competence and cognition who must be spoon-fed a scripted curriculum. Having anticipated this argument, let me put it to rest. An idea that is common to teacher training and professional development is that there should be a “why” behind everything a teacher does in the classroom, from classroom management to instructional decisions. The same principle applies here: the point is not for school districts to adopt a curriculum and for teachers to deliver it robotically. Well-prepared teachers should acquire through their training and professional development a sophisticated understanding of their subject matter and pedagogy and have it *operationalized* for them in the form of a curriculum or program.

The one thing we cannot give teachers is more time. It is too much to ask of teachers to create their own programs and curricula; the opportunity costs are profound. The twofold challenge for policymakers is to privilege the adoption of an effective curriculum but also for teachers to understand *why* it’s effective. It cannot be denied that the current culture of teaching largely expects teachers to both deliver and design curricula, making it less likely they do either expertly. This de facto demand tends to result in a student experience that is incoherent, marked by curriculum gaps and repetitions and by lessons that are lacking in rigor. The principal point here is to return to teachers time spent needlessly or excessively planning units and lessons from scratch so that they can spend more time on higher-yielding activities: studying student work, giving feedback, deepening their subject expertise, and building relationships with students and families.

The ed reform era, now receding in power and prestige, overestimated the impact of education policy and “structural reform” to improve student outcomes. Renewed efforts to improve school performance must focus on instructional reform. This does not imply, however, that there is no role for policymakers, only that they must be clear-eyed about their leverage and its limits, keeping in mind these key takeaways:

- Efforts to improve student outcomes by changing the composition of the teacher workforce or dramatically raising their level of sophistication and skill are unlikely to be successful due to the large number of teachers needed to staff our schools. What must change is the job: teaching must be doable by women and men of ordinary talents and sentience.
- While the evidence base is insufficiently robust to say with certainty, there is ample reason to suggest it is easier, less expensive, and more effective to change curricula than to change teachers.
- The soul of effective teaching is studying student work, giving effective feedback, and developing relationships with students. Teacher time spent on curating and customizing lessons, however valuable, takes time away from these more impactful uses of teacher time. The adoption of a high-quality curriculum and training on its effective implementation is the first, most critical step toward transforming the teacher’s job.

- Education occurs in a public context; there will always be a role for policymakers to ensure accountability. However, improvements at scale will not be wrested from rewards and punishments, nor from other “structural” reforms.

There are, finally, encouraging signs in both education policy and practice that suggest a new willingness to question long-standing classroom practices and that curriculum and instruction are gaining traction as reform levers, at least in early childhood education. In the past few years, the science of reading (SoR) movement has emerged as one such welcome development in literacy education.

Drawing upon a deep research base in a variety of fields, including cognitive psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience, the movement has sought to reorient teacher training, curriculum adoption, and teacher professional development around evidence-based instructional practices, particularly foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Critically, the SoR movement seeks to address the shortcomings in teacher preparation and professional development.

Indeed, much of the movement’s energy and focus have been directed at colleges of education, which have come under harsh scrutiny for their failure to adequately prepare teacher candidates to successfully teach reading. In a 2023 report by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), which monitors and reports on teacher preparation programs, Dr. Heather Peske, NCTQ president, stated, “We’re in the midst of a long overdue revolution on the science of reading, but teacher prep programs haven’t fully caught up.”³⁶ The report studied nearly seven hundred teacher preparation programs across the country, looking for evidence that coursework for future elementary school teachers included “core components of scientifically based reading instruction.” NCTQ determined that only 25 percent of the programs it evaluated adequately cover all five core components of scientifically based reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. “Perhaps more alarmingly, another 25% of programs do not adequately cover even a single component,” the report noted.³⁷

What is true of teacher training can be said with equal certainty about curricula. It is simply too much to expect teachers to be able to effectively operationalize the science of reading in the absence of effective curriculum and professional development on its implementation. As many expert observers have noted, the SoR movement will ultimately succeed or fail not just on early literacy skills but through the adoption and implementation of the kind of “knowledge-rich” curriculum E. D. Hirsch Jr. and others have championed for decades. This requires collaboration and coordination by teachers within and across grades and over many years of schooling. It is literally impossible to accomplish if teachers simply close their doors and teach what they like. Thus, the SoR movement offers both a test case and a potential proof point for many of the arguments made above.

A strong, knowledge-based curriculum not only leads to smarter teachers and students but also has beneficial downstream effects, such as giving teachers the opportunity to develop subject matter expertise, help struggling students, and make connections with families rather

than spending hours each week scouring the internet and creating lesson plans from scratch. Let's not ask what more teachers can do. Let's ask instead what are the things that only a teacher can do. Everything else should be a job for someone else.

HESI PRACTITIONER COUNCIL RESPONSES

Essays in this series were reviewed by members of the Hoover Education Success Initiative (HESI) Practitioner Council. For more information about the Practitioner Council and HESI, visit us online at hoover.org/hesi.

The use of HQIM in every school district (not lip service to use, but real use) would be a strong, positive step in education practices in the United States. However, some of the difficulties with making this a reality are not mentioned in Pondiscio's very fine piece. Many teachers simply don't believe that their students can handle the newer, more rigorous materials—and in many cases, where their students may be two or more years behind grade level, the teachers are right. Much stronger pre-K-12 schooling is indispensable to making widespread use of HQIM a reality. A second issue is principal buy-in: in many cases, principals simply don't understand why curriculum reform is so important and act accordingly—for example, failing to put curriculum-specific elements into their classroom observation rubrics. Finally, a point that Pondiscio does make: professional development for teachers can't be a one-day-a-year business. If we are going to change how teachers go about selecting their instructional materials, we have to change their entire professional mindsets, and that takes multiple interventions over a long period.

—Dr. David Steiner, executive director of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy

Pondiscio's paper is a history of reform and a challenge for the future. As a person who has been in the education reform movement for more than thirty years, I recognize that system change is difficult. Clearly, the quality of the teacher does have an impact on the success of the student, but is that impact as great as that of the quality of the curriculum? In my career, I have advocated for teacher evaluations and the categorizing of the teachers based on their ability to deliver academic results. In retrospect, the teacher was the wrong target, and that reform ultimately did not yield the significant change we had hoped.

Pondiscio's focus on curriculum ultimately is a very logical approach to improve academic outcomes. We know that curriculum drives results, but curriculum without system change and professional development will likely not yield significant academic improvements. The author's reference to the science of reading evidence that is sweeping the nation is an example of how we need quality curriculum and support to change systems and teaching. Change will not occur without the entire suite of actions.

—Rep. Bob Behning, Indiana House of Representatives

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A Nation at Risk + 40

The modern school-reform movement in the United States was set in motion by the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Countless education policy changes at the local, state, and national levels came as a result. *A Nation at Risk + 40* is a research initiative designed to better understand the impact of these efforts. Each author in this series has gone deep in a key area of school reform, exploring the following questions: *What kinds of reforms have been attempted and why? What is the evidence of their impact? What are the lessons for today's education policymakers?* As the nation's schools work to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this series not only describes the education-reform journey of the past forty years, it also provides timely and research-driven guidance for the future.

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